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ABSTRACT

Jesse Delia's essay "Communication Research: A History" (1987) avoids defining "communication research" as subject phenomena, methodology, or a progressive stock of positive propositions. In this way, his essay accommodates in a generous, comprehending, and constructive way a wide array of approaches, disparate interests and motivations, and findings of varied reliability and durability in a broad and non-judgmental sweep. The essay is organized by both macro and micro temporal structures, develops topics by both intellectual saliency and paradigmatic contrast in a fair manner, directs the reader with meta-communication, and progresses from idea to idea with minimal redundancy. However, it remains deeply problematical and emblematic of the political difficulty inherent in disciplinary historiography. By stopping at 1960, more than half of all communication research ever conducted and published was eliminated. Even accepting this limitation, the studies Delia chooses to represent the history of communication research focus on mass communication research. Omitted from the essay are the reception and formation of ideas of which academic writing is supposedly about. Women and people of color were left out entirely, as were key figures in social psychology, many personalists, phenomenologists, and existentialists. Delia's history makes no account of psychoanalytic thought, most social theory, the linguistic turn in philosophy, rhetorical and hermeneutic theory, and semiotics. The essay is politically conservative within a particular meaning of the term--it is the conservatism of the affluent, of more and bigger is better, of all benefit if they cooperate. (Contains 23 references.) (RS)

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CONCEIVING INTELLECTUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

CONCEIVING INTELLECTUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY
IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES

It is a truism that history is politically useful in the present. This is as true in the writing of the history of an academic field as in any other type of history. This essay reviews Jesse Delia's "Communication Research: A History" to describe its implied political content, especially as communication studies seeks its place among other fields.

Conceiving Intellectual and Institutional History in Communication Studies

Writing the past of the academic disciplines is a political act, most often a conservative one. Much of the "history" of the "speech communication" field, for instance, has been written in unselfconsciously heroic terms. So, when in 1959 Andrew T. Weaver wrote in the Quarterly Journal of Speech about the "Seventeen Who Made History-- The Founders of the Association," Weaver said, among many other venerating things, that the seventeen founders of what is today the Speech Communication Association, "... were men of foresight and courage. They established a beach-head on a bleak and barren coast, and they held it and expanded it under the guns of the enemy" (1959, p.199). Weaver concluded with pious euphemism that it would do current association members benefit to "... commune with the spirits of those [founders] who have climbed aloft ..." (1959, p.199). The past, constructed in this self-congratulatory way, assures one that she or he is a part of something to be maintained and only changed by additional increments. Given a thread of specific content, say, that the genius of the founders was their desire to study communication "effects," then the whole machinery of "historical" admiration can be converted to the hortatorical task of giving scholars a purpose and exhorting them to fulfill their destiny and

complete the irresistible vision of the founders (e.g., to study "effects"). If one accepts the determining purposes contained in the historical narrative of the field of study in which one has consented to play a part (and here we need not think exclusively of the heroic prose of the likes of Andrew T. Weaver but of the implicit narratives of origin and promise that undergird almost all of the introductory paragraphs of almost all "normal" academic writing) then it only remains to adjust the definitions of the central phenomena and contest the efficacy of specific projects in meeting the agreed ends. In this mode, inquiry is authorized by reference to the prior "literature" in the tradition. Those who begin with another literature are, ipso facto, in a different field; and those who have little or no literature are amateurs. Out of such narratives of origin, possession, and progress millions of dollars can flow in one direction or another, both in academia and among its clients and patrons.

And yet, academics (the people) in most fields do not often consciously reflect on their disciplinary history,do not know the disciplinary historical narrative with many particulars, do not feel obliged to carry out a great historic mandate. Most academics have difficulty in conceiving of the history of their field outside of the span of their own careers; most scholars are markedly ahistorical in their approach. This means that in the space between the official, honorific histories of disciplines (e.g., Work &

Jeffrey, 1989), and the imprecise accounts of the trajectory of the discipline most scholars possess, there is considerable space for intellectual construction and play. It is now apparent that one can enter into this space with subversive motives to reveal the pretensions and disclose the false innoncence hidden within a discipline or profession's discourse (Vesey, 1965; Bledstein, 1976) and to illustrate by comparison what is unexamined, prejudicial, and omissive (what is manifested as differences of status and power) in the routine self-understandings of academics living in specific historical formations (White, 1978; Faucault, 1980; Hariman, 1986). But these "meta-" level accounts of disciplinary structure are not the only fruits of ahistorical scholarship. In a far less suspicious vein, ahistorcal disciplines have also turned to historical writing in order (1) to argue for a particular position by saying in effect "this is the order in which I thought my thoughts-- see the logic, see the progression" (e.g., Miller & Burgoon, 1973), and (2) as a heuristic for "taking stock" or for making an encyclopedic inventory of the discipline in order to give a fair and plausible rendition of its contemporary features to outsiders and newcomers. It is this last sort of historical writing as it occurs in "communication studies" that I intend to examine in the brief essay that follows, a review of Jesse G. Delia's "Communication Research: A History."

Imagine the telephone ringing. It is Charles R. Berger of Northwestern University and Steven H. Chaffee of Stanford University (a conference call). They are inviting you to write the lead essay (after the "Introduction") to a new SAGE volume, Handbook of Communication Science projected at just under 1,000 pages for $65 in 1987. Will you write the history of communication research? This is flattering; it is a great opportunity to reach a large audience with the sort of durably influential essay one could never get published in a journal via peer review. You have certain strong feelings about the history of communication studies; and this would be an ideal time to confirm, modify,or extend those ideas. You accept the invitation, subject to a few clarifications and qualifications, and immediately the terror of what you have agreed to dawns. You must begin, in this relatively ahistorically conscious discipline, almost from scratch. You can find in the library only Karl Wallace's History of Speech Education in America and Melvin DeFleur's historical Theories of Mass Communication. Both of these books are totally inadequate for your purposes. You face the prospect of sifting thousands of articles in dozens of journals and hundreds of books in order to write your history. Fortunately, Thomas W. Benson's Speech Communication in the 20th Century (1985) appears while your essay is in progress. There are some other shortcuts to take, but it is a sometimes dispiriting process to cut and paste a past about which many living people have very strong

commitments. The burden of diplomacy is as great as the massive weight of the documents that were once "communication research" and are now the artifacts of the "history" of communication research. This, we can easily imagine, was Jesse Delia's deeply ambivalent position in the early-mid 1980s. He responded with sixty-six pages of text and 374 references to scholarly literature. Delia has written so much that he is bound to annoy everyone, but in many way's Delia's "Communication Research: A History" is an outstanding essay on its subject. It avoids defining "communication research" as subject phenomena, methodology, or a progressive stock of positive propositions. Hence, it accomodates in a generous, comprehending, and constructive way a wide array of approaches, disparate interests and motivations, and findings of varied reliability and durability in its broad and non-judgemental sweep. My reader must comprehend the significance of the attitude of this essay. It would be equally plausible to begin such a paper by defining a great deal <u>out</u> of the tradition of "communication research"-- rhetorical studies, for instance-- and describing the whole development of the discipline as false starts, missteps, grave errors, and it might be plausible to argue that "communication research," as such, does not yet exist and will only exist in the future when certain stiff conditions are met. Delia sagely avoids this divisive approach saying that his is a history of the "institutional" development of communication

research, though I think more accurately it is an account of the origin of certain landmark institutions and prominent "invisible colleges" in the study of human communication. The upshot of this is that in securing a broad and inclusive past, Delia certainly opens the way for an intellectually pluralistic and institutionally robust future. Some readers might have wished for a "military" history of communication studies, might long to have in print a narrative of humanists versus behaviorists, and of journalists versus "speech" people, but as revealing as that might be, it would arguably give no better account of the peculiar amalgam we are today.

Delia's history has many other pluses, strongest among them the clarity of the writing itself. While this is not an essay one would assign to undergraduates in a beginning course, the intrusion of the references and the compression of ideas would baffle all but the most dauntless of undergraduate students, this essay is clearly organized by both macro and micro temporal structures, develops topics by both intellectual saliency and paradigmatic contrast in a fair and convincing manner, directs the reader with ample meta-communication, and progresses from idea to idea (trusting the reader to comprehend the relatively jargon-free text) with minimal redundancy and no tedium.

Frye wrote from the first pages of his Anatomy that one is in the "ironic mode" when one is able to observe from a superior position "a scene of bondage, frustration, or

absurdity... " (p. 34). There is a likable inkling of such irony in Delia's essay. He is well aware that it is possible to shift to those "meta-" critical/historical perspectives on academic production that I mentioned above (i.e., Foncault, Derrida), aware one could rewrite a few sentences here and there in his essay and one would have a vision of researchers in the thrall of the corporations and the Federal government, the speech department people in permanent obeisance to psychologists and others, the journalism scholars the captives of their own students, etc. Delia does not have to say these things to indicate that he knows them, and that is one of the real charms of his article.

Having indicated my awe at the task Delia undertook, and my genuine appreciation for the scope, diplomacy, attitude, and expression of this "history", for me Delia's essay remains deeply problematical and emblematic of the political difficulty inherent in disciplinary historiography. Now in saying this I want to make it plain that I do not mean that Jesse Delia used this essay to promote his favorite ideas or to diminish the ideas that are dearest to me. Indeed, Delia <u>never</u> cites the leading lights of his favored "personal construct" theories, George Kelly and Heinz Werner (Delia & Clark, 1977, p. 327), and <u>only once</u> (p. 35) cites his own prolific research or that of his closest associates; moreover, he amply praises the quality of my favorite research-- rhetorical studies (pp. 79,

81-82), implying wryly that rhetorical studies has as both a charm and drawback a certain "metatheoretical preoccupation" (p. 82). The problem here is more diffuse and more central to the task than isolating mere "biases". To get at the problem one must give consideration to what Delia has included and enlarged and what he has omitted (admitting that omission is inevitable and even desirable in such a project).

"Communication Research: A History" advertises (p. 23) that it consists of three major sections: the research record from 1900 to 1940, the "coalescence" of communication as a research domain (1940-1960), and the location of communication research in journalism schools and speech departments (also 1940-1960). By stopping at 1960, of course, far more than half of all communication research ever conducted and published is eliminated, and that is unfortunate because we want to know the "end of the story," want to know how we came to be what we are. But even accepting this limitation, the studies Delia chooses to represent the history of communication research demonstrate certain remarkable tendencies. The essay takes up, in order, propaganda studies (pp. 25-28), public opinion research (pp. 28-29), political communication research (pp. 29-30), the Chicago school of sociology (pp. 30-37) with consideration of Blumer's Payne Fund volumes (p. 33), early social psychology (pp. 37-43), early studies of radio and reading in the field of education (pp. 43-46), and early

commercially sponsored research (pp. 46-54). In the first thirty-four pages of this sixty-six page essay, Delia covers approximately forty years and only mentions a handful of "speech" researchers, Charles Woolbert (who actually was an English literature doctorate) and Franklin Knower primarily,very briefly as a subpoint under social psychology; what is enlarged at every turn is media studies and particularly those media studies that enjoyed wide public exposure and significant external funding.

Hence, Delia enshrines a peculiar cast of characters as the leading lights of "communication research": Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson (a library scientist), Kurt Lewin, Carl Hovland and the other Yale social psychologists, and finally, the only hero in this Valhalla (see p. 57 on the "emergence" of communication research) who made a living teaching human communication, Wilbur Schramm. Over and again it is Laswell (at least twelve times in the text) and Lazarsfeld (at least twenty-three times in the text) who are cited as the leaders in communication research. This is prima facie preposterous to me, and I suspect that many other scholars in human communication experience this as vertiginous nonsense. To be certain that I had not been miseducated and was sadly lacking in the facts concerning Lasswell and Lazarsfeld, I have done some checking. Lasswell is only mentioned briefly in two, Lazarsfeld in only five of the other twenty-eight chapters of the Handbook of Communication Science, each is mentioned once in the SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal

Communication, Lasswell is mentioned once in the Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory, neither is mentioned in the twelve essays in the 1990 Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association. Certainly, if one goes back to the 1950s and early 1960s, and especially if one concentrates in mass media and public opinion research, there is consistent modest citation of Lasswell and sometimes heavy citation of Lazarsfeld though by far most often of very specific research findings. But there are a number of other people who are approximately as prominently cited in that literature. Indeed, if one shifts to a slightly more social psychological perspective Lazarsfeld is overwhelmed by references to Allport, Osgood, Tannenbaum, Festinger, Hovland, Doob, Heider, Janis, Suci, Rokeach, Feshbach, Asch, Sherif, Kelly, and Newcomb. Delia, of course, captures in a somewhat different way the importance of social psychology in communication research, but what are we to make of this seeming fetish with Lasswell and Lazarsfeld? If it is not good history, perhaps it is good politics.

Delia says it right out on page 72: in the span from 1900 to 1960 communication research is mass communication research. His own paper says this is not true; but it certainly might be true if one was not writing to ones students and colleagues as much as one is writing on behalf of one's students and colleagues, and this history is

actually addressed to (Machiavelli would be proud) deans, academic and research vice presidents, foundations, government agencies, and all those who expect an academic social science to produce amoral, control knowledge, with self-evident policy implications, from an exhaustively elaborated central focus, via the coordinated efforts of competitively positioned international research teams. These demands on one's past can produce a Paul Lazarsfeld in the "history of communication research" the way a magician will inevitably pull a rabbit from a hat. Mass media as a billion dollar industry of global significance and an Austrian sociologist brought to the U.S. by the Rockefeller Foundation and settled at Columbia University in Manhattan all exist in the realm of pure self-evidence. No explanation is required. And it is from this stream of history one is supposed to make sense of the founding of the great Institute for Communication Research at Illinois (p.74) and the great State University of Iowa sending forth behavioral researchers Becker, Miller, Bostrom,and Bowers (p.80). In other words, this may not be very convincing disciplinary history for discipline insiders; but this is very powerful history in writing communication into mainstream social science for purposes of enhancing one's institutional stature and prospects for external funding (the kind Lazarsfeld got, to keep up the Lazarsfeldian tradition). Besides, Delia crowds practically the whole communication studies family into the picture;read the particulars and it is all there.

History writing is inevitably omissive, and, as stated above, the historiography of academic disciplines must prune sharply in order not to be an endless recapitulation. Delia, as inclusive as this essay is, necessarily treated superficially or left out entirely certain aspects of the communication research story. I think some of it was left out because it would contradict the tale of Paul Lazarsfeld. Some of these omissions might make a strong point of entry into a future history of communication research. Consider, in a jumble, some of these omissions.

First, the pretenses of this "history." Academic writing is supposedly about the formation and reception of ideas, but you would have to squeeze very hard to make any ideas drop from this essay, at most a handful would fall. In place of ideas are projects and their motivations, hence Delia's claim to be writing institutional history. But this too is pretense. Herein we can see SCA and ICA form and establish journals, but there is scarcely a hint of the internal contest and transformations that have animated these institutions (pp. 78, 80, 83). There is the mention of the founding of a few major doctoral granting departments but again there is no struggle involved (pp. 74-81). Delia need not have looked very far. His own department at Illinois did not break from English until 1947 and separated from Speech and Hearing Science in 1973. Delia delights in claiming Charles Woolbert for Illinois (p.79), but Woolbert left Illinois for Iowa when his work was not supported. (The

Illinois archives show that Woolbert abjured specialization and tested "theory" as an Anti-Saloon League advocate). Delia pretends to reveal the linkage between communication research and the industry it studies, but this subject is never pursued (pp. 46-54). Delia's "history" purports to deal in the contradictions inherent in reformist social science (pp.24-25) and in the problematic of objectifying research and it uses (p. 52), but does not do so except to say that a drive for "theory" led to the rejection of "atheoretical, politically suffused work" (p. 59) but the successful defense (by Lazarsfeld, of course) of commercially sponsored "administrative research" as being "theoretically" valid (p. 52). In this "history" Delia seeks an accommodation between North America and Europe, but only manager to announce the "margination" of European research (p.69); because, after all, "At it's inception communication research was an almost exclusively American enterprise ..." (p. 69). That Adorno and Lowenthal found American thinking "ahistorical and uncritical" (p. 71) is of only passing interest,and that "communication research" as Delia defines it did not participate in the 1950s "mass culture" debate (p. 71) gives no alarm that perhaps this "history," even and especially as a history of mass communication research, may be hopelessly inadequate. Finally, Delia attempts to include film and popular culture studies (p. 71), but only by brief mention and hence consigns these topics to non-history.

Other things were left out of Delia's "history" entirely. Women and people of color were left out. I do not mean that Delia is sexist or racist, but it is a discomfitting history that can do entirely without the categories of race and sex. Of course limiting the history to pre-1960 studies eliminates practically all "movement" research. One must wonder if this is too great a cost for remaining within a formal boundary. Our past weighs so heavily in these matters. At least thirteen published studies from 1930 to 1960 "proved" that women are more easily persuaded than men (Karlins & Abelson, 1970, pp.89-91 would make this axiomatic, with lewd qualification). A good "history" ought to give some answer for these findings. It should also explain how the "tradition" is able to report in good conscience counter-intuitive stuff like humor is not effective in persuasion (Lull, 1940) and disorganized messages are no less persuasive than organized ones (Thompson, 1960). There is a great deal for which to answer.

There are other purer omissions. Though this "history" locates the center of communication research in the area of mass communication, that Innis, McLuhan, Ong, and Lord had begun to do something very interesting with media by 1960 is not here evident (though Innis and McLuhan get listed in the references). (Similarly, Raymond Williams had published parts of The Long Revolution in the U.S. and Europe by 1960, but one must suppose that this goes with the general "margination" of Europeans.)

I suspect that many people would quarrel with Delia's omission of key figures in social psychology, perhaps especially prone to dissent those who have followed along the line of development from group research, to leadership, to organization. Robert Bales is absent as is Solomon Asch and his tremendously influential studies in conformity. Milton Rokeach does not rate a mention. The electrifying effect of nonverbal communication research in the 1950s, Ray Birdwhistell and all the other pioneers in this area, are left out of this "history" entirely. Those scholars who struggled with the "systems" conception of communication (including Bateson) upon which every contemporary understanding of human communication depends are reduced to reference notes in Delia's treatment.

Korzybski, Hayakawa, Wendell Johnson, Irving Lee, and Stuart Chase get no mention in this "history" of communication research. Similarly, Maslow, May, Rogers, Laing, E. Becker, and Buber, and all the many personalists, phenomenologists, and existentialists rate nothing in Delia's narrative, not even a reference. All of these thinkers are too moralistic to be a part of our past, I suspect. But the result in telling the story this way is that there is also no Cicourel, Garfinkel, Howard Becker, Schutz, Luckmann, Peter Berger, Gurwitsch (Goffman gets minimal reference), etc., to explain qualitative methods, discourse analysis, etc., as they exist today.

Delia's "history" makes no account of psychoanalytic thought, most social theory, the linguistic turn in philosophy (no "speech acts" which technically comes before 1960, no Wittgenstein, and no Cassirer), rhetorical and hermeneutic theory, and , amazingly, semiotics. And saying this one realizes that the great omission in this "history" is the story of the study of language. Not only are the usual semiotic figures-- Peirce, Saussure, Jakobson, Barthes, Sebeok-- absent, so also are Hymes, Bernstein, Jesperson, Bloomfield, Sapir (Sapir wrote the 1931 Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences article "Communication"), Luria, Chomsky, Skinner, Vygotsky, George Miller, and Whatmough (all before 1960) among many others. Leaving out "language" from communication creates a remarkable distortion in the research subject.

I began by saying that writing academic history is a political act, usually of a conservative cast. Jesse Delia's "Communication Research: A History" is certainly politically conservative within a very particular meaning of that term. Delia assumes, at least in this one essay, that communication studies by the late-1980s has "expansive possibilities" (p. 86). He believes this because he views the study of human communication like interest group politics. There is the basic "orality alliance" in the speech field (p. 78). "SCA" is a "compromise" name which "captured the profession's uneasy balance ..." (p. 83). Social scientists and rhetorical critics/theorists have

"'joint custody'" over the speech field (p. 81). Hence, when one "joins" the "Hovland-Lazarsfeld communication research tradition" with the speech departments (p. 82), one gets an irresistible force, not intellectually, but in academic politics. This is the conservatism of the affluent, of more and bigger is better, of everyone benefits if they cooperate. This is how we got to be what we are today. If one likes it, she or he can photo-copy Delia's "history" and send it to the dean. If one does not approve, then she or he is going to have to write a new history of communication research in order to claim something other than the eclectic future which Jesse Delia has benignly planned.

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